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Ravenstonedale and Smardale

a walk with two nature reserves, three pubs, an ancient church and priory, a flower rich meadow, a meandering beck, Giants' Graves and a railway viaduct



'Discover Eden' is a countryside recreation and interpretation programme being managed by East Cumbria Countryside Project in partnership with the Eden Rivers Trust supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Fourteen circuital routes at dispersed locations throughout East Cumbria provide an opportunity to explore the great scenic diversity associated with the Eden catchment landscape.

Each route is well way-marked with arrows and the distinctive 'Discover Eden' kingfisher logo. Watch out for a series of small bronze panels etched with motifs depicting aspects of human and natural heritage. Rubbings can be taken from these using paper and crayon.

By walking all routes you can eventually collect rubbings of eighty four images.



bronze motifs by Pip Hall

Brief route details:

This route can be walked in two halves – north and south of the village.

Parking: space in front of Ravenstonedale School

Length: a total of 7½ miles 12 kilometres 3 – 4 hours

Grade: easy to moderate

Route: Ravenstonedale (>south) – Fat Lamb Hotel
 – Ravenstonedale (>north) – Smardale Bridge
 – Smardale viaduct – Ravenstonedale

Clothing: boots and outdoor clothing

Please leave gates as you find them, leave no litter and keep dogs under close control.

Smardale viaduct





Priory remains behind Ravenstonedale church

Ravenstonedale and Smardale

*"The late sun beams light-shafts down on Harter Fell
and rising I glory in a dearer sense
of home, head on northward past the Giants Graves
to Smardale Bridge....."*

Michael Ffinch

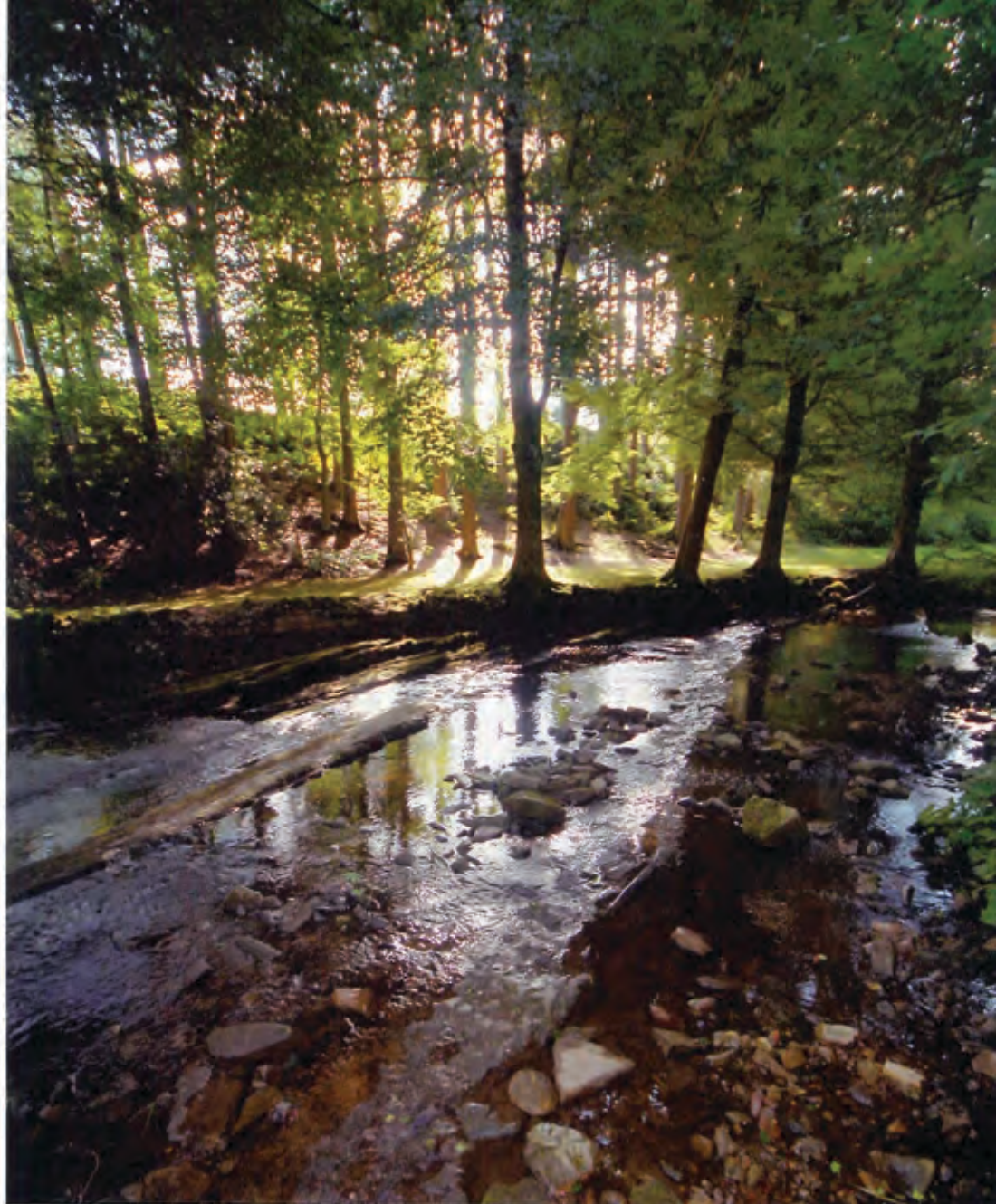
Ravenstonedale Parish contains a wealth of wildlife and is steeped in human history. The village once had several shops and its own weekly market and, at the beginning of the 19th century, was a prosperous small town with a thriving cottage knitting industry, sending 1000 pairs of hand-knitted socks every week to the market in Kendal.

The church was built in 1744, but originates from Medieval times and has many Norman features. Behind the church there are the excavated foundations of a Gilbertine Priory established during the 12th century by St Gilbert the son of a Norman Knight. At the dissolution of the monasteries, the Priory land became the property of the Wharton family.

The beck is Scandal Beck, a tributary of the Eden, which rises on the north western slopes of Wild Boar Fell above Stennerskeugh Clouds and flows north through Smardale, joining the Eden near Soulby. It is internationally important ecologically, supporting significant populations of the native white clawed crayfish, river lamprey and salmon.

Ravenstonedale also has a strong population of red squirrels, although it is subject to relentless incursions from invading grey squirrels.

white clawed crayfish lino print for bronze panel



Scandal Beck



panoramic view of Mallerstang and Wild Boar Fell

Northern Smardale route

If you just want to do the northern Smardale route, walk along the road from the school, past the entrance to the church. At the road junction, turn right and then left into a field, over a wall-stile signposted to Smardale. From there, follow the directions from page 17.

Southern Ravenstonedale and full-length route

To do the full-length route, or just the southern section via the 'Fat Lamb', walk along the road from the school into the village to the corner, past the 'Black Swan'.

Note the spinning- and knitting-gallery attached to the cottage just before you get to the pub, one of a few surviving in Cumbria.

Turn right, up the main street. Half way up the hill, take the footpath through the stone step-stile on the left, signposted to Lockholme Head. At the top of the grass slope, go through the metal kissing-gate and then straight ahead with the wall on your left. Go through a gated wall-stile and then, bearing slightly diagonally to the right, proceed across five fields with gated stone wall-stiles.

The panoramic view of the hills ahead spans Ash Fell on the left, Mallerstang Edge, Wild Boar Fell and Stennerskeugh Clouds in the middle, and the Howgills on the right.

Continue over a step-stile, a wall-stile and another step-stile, then bear sharply right through a gated stile onto the farmac lane. Cross the lane and the stile opposite, then bear left across the next field and over a step-stile into a meadow.



panoramic view of Howgill fells

This hay meadow has been traditionally managed for at least 400 years and is exceptionally rich in a diverse mix of wild flowers and grasses. Seventy nine different plants have been recorded.



Bowber Head and Piper Hole hay meadows © Natural England

Herbicides and artificial fertilizer have never been applied and cutting late in the season allows plants such as yellow rattle, pignut, wood cranesbill, lady's mantle and great burnet to flower and disperse seed, thus ensuring their continuing propagation and survival. It is an officially-designated Site of Special Scientific Interest and represents one of the few remaining examples of this habitat, which, on a national scale, is now extremely rare, with an estimated three percent or less left undamaged by agricultural intensification.

The farm is called Piper Hole, which apparently refers to the large hollow on the right where a wounded Scots soldier, left behind by Bonnie Prince Charlie's retreating army, in 1745, drew attention to himself by defiantly playing his bagpipes and was promptly murdered by a local farmer. It is interesting to reflect that the meadow we see today is the same, unchanged, herb-rich meadow that echoed to the piper's last lament over 250 years ago.

Carry on with the trees and fence on your right, cross two more gated stiles, then turn right onto a tarmac track over a concrete bridge and after 45 metres turn left through another stile.

Proceed across this odd-shaped field over a bridge in the middle, passing to the left of the farm house and going through the gated stiles on both sides of the farm track. Bear slightly right and continue over another stile, following the wall on your right to the barn, then bear right along the farm track, past Lockholme Hall, then left over a wooden stile and carry on with the hedge on your left and the wall on your right.

Lockholme Hall is the ancestral home of the Fothergill family. One of the oldest families in the area, it had a remarkable impact on intellectual life in 17th century Britain, producing a vice-chancellor and two masters of Oxford colleges and a master of St. John's College, Cambridge. The most notable member of the family, however, was Eleanor Gaunt, born Eleanor Fothergill of Brownber, who was the last woman to be burned at the stake in 1685. Her 'crime' was helping a wounded rebel during the Monmouth rebellion, who had subsequently informed on her and was pardoned for his betrayal. In Ravenstonedale church, there are stained glass windows in her memory and for other Fothergill family members.



stained glass window in Ravenstonedale church



Crossbank Nature Reserve

Go through the little gate and straight on to the next house, which is Lockholme Head, keeping close to the wall on your right.

When you get to the far side of the field, **DO NOT go through the wall-stile.**

At this stile turn sharp left, staying in this field, and follow the path with the wall on your right. Go through the field gate and over the sleeper bridge. The public path continues ahead, but our route turns right along a permissive path where a footbridge half way along provides access to the Crossbank Nature Reserve.

This wildlife haven has been developed by Paul Bonsall, the proprietor of the 'Fat Lamb' Hotel. Over eighty species of birds have been identified, including snipe, a variety of ducks, common and green sandpiper, reed bunting and sedge and willow warblers. If you keep very quiet and stand or sit very still, you might just see some of them!

From the reserve, the path proceeds along through a field gate and then round to the left up the steep hill to the bird-hide.

The bird-hide provides a comfortable elevated vantage point for watching the bird life in the nature reserve and the surrounding landscape.



moorhen

illustration based on © image
Bob Glover (rspb-images.com)

From the bird-hide, go through the kissing-gate and straight on to the edge of the private garden, where you turn sharp right along the narrow footpath behind the house. This brings you out past the large garage on your left, to the back of the 'Fat Lamb', where you bear left and then left again along the road.

The hotel is open all day for food and drink should you wish to pause for refreshment.

After about half a kilometre along the road, turn right through a gate, signposted to Bowber Head and Ravenstonedale. Cross the field, go over the stile and keep to the wall on your right to the corner. Go through the pedestrian gate, down the slope keeping alongside the hedge and trees, cross over two footbridges and pass to the left of the barn. Cross the beck on the stone slabs and over the wall-stile.

This is the Scandal Beck again, two kilometres upstream from where you started. The beck is often dry along this stretch as it runs underground in dry weather!

The remainder of our route follows its course back to the village and beyond to Smardale viaduct.

Go straight ahead with the wall on your left. Turn left over the footbridge, through the gated stile and cross diagonally to the far corner of the field and a gated stile beneath a tree. You then walk ahead, separated from Scandal beck by a section of fence, wall and hedge. Go through a pedestrian gate in a new hedge, over three wall-stiles in quick succession, then four further wall-stiles, the last of which brings you into an old tree-lined laning. Turn right over a footbridge, then left along the lane.

After 50 metres, just past a field barn on the right, go left through a gate signposted to Ravenstonedale. Follow the beck with the wall on your right to a corner, over a stile into the adjacent field and then a stile onto the lane. If you want to end your walk here, turn left into the village and retrace your steps back to the school. To continue on the route to Smardale, turn right then left along the green track signed to Garshill. At the Garshill road, bear left over a wall-stile into the field signposted Smardale.



the 'Fat Lamb'

Reading the landscape

"When I was young...I felt in my bones that the landscape itself was speaking to me, in a language that I did not understand, and I had to find out how to read it."

Professor W.G Hoskins

The countryside in England is dominated by its patchwork of fields - a living, historic tapestry of permanent grass pasture, rough grazing and meadows, and arable and horticultural crops. Integrated within the fields are the tracks and footpaths, and the hedged and walled boundaries, like the stitching in an ancient quilt.

During the thousands of years that the English landscape has been farmed, Bronze Age fields have been subsumed within medieval field systems, which, in turn, have been reorganized by parliamentary enclosures and in more recent times devastated by mechanized agricultural practice.

Despite the changes, it is still possible in some areas to see the physical remnants of the earlier layers of our landscape heritage surviving as mysterious grass-covered mounds, banks and terraces. Later field patterns can be identified by their shape and size and the configuration of their fields and boundaries.

Even the Public Path network, which is hundreds of years old, enables us literally to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors and tells us quite a lot about how they lived.

The landscape can take us back in time if we just take the time to read its language.

Linchets in fields behind Smardale Bridge

Smardale, northern section

Cross the field signposted Smardale, to a wall-stile that brings you out onto the main A685. With great care go over the road and climb over the wall-stile opposite.

Follow the track, through a field gate, past a small stone barn and proceed on the track until it curves away into a field on the right, where you go straight on to the gate at the far left corner of the conifer plantation. Continue ahead across this large field, slightly bearing right but keeping below where the ground rises steeply on your right. Go over the wall-stile to the left of the gate. Bear left diagonally across the slope and aim for the bottom of the old quarry ahead, across a small sleeper bridge, with Scandal Beck down to your left meandering toward Smardale Bridge.

As you approach the beck, look out for birds like dippers and grey wagtails. In the summer months you might also see green sandpiper and green shank. Other birds include wheatear, redstart and pied flycatcher. Plants include lady's bedstraw, wild thyme, harebell and quaking grass, and the colourful monkey flower in the beck.



dipper

Illustration based on © image
Mike Lane (iabb-images.co.uk)

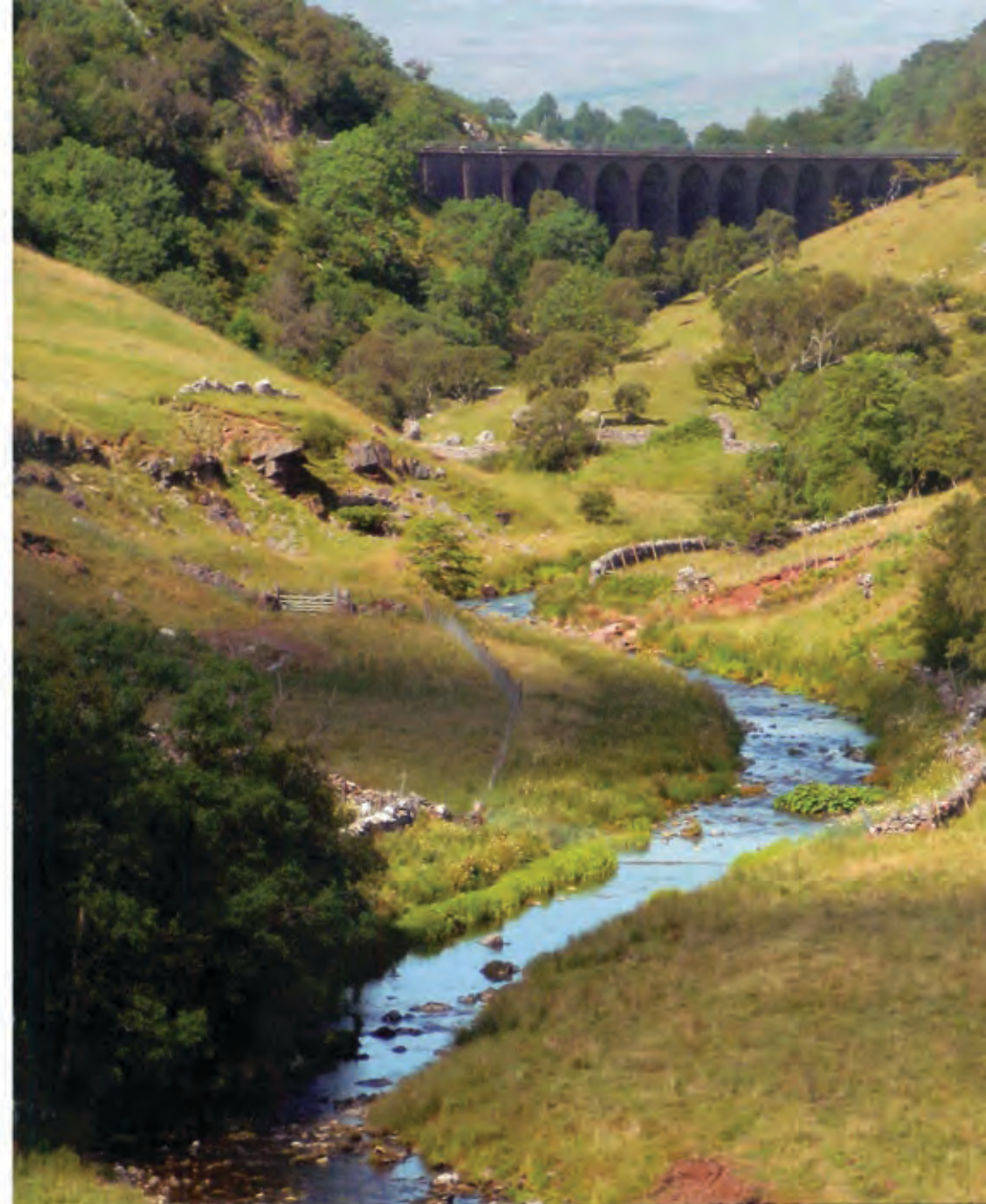
Go through the gate in the wall, which brings you onto a track just over to the right of Smardale Bridge. Turn right, up the wide track.

Now you have the Smardale viaduct coming into view. Smardale is like a lost valley, full of the wildlife which has all but gone elsewhere and brimming with the visible remains of human history. The flora is particularly impressive, together with the insect life associated with it. Butterflies are thriving here and in July and August you are also likely to see common hawker and golden banded dragonflies and common blue damselflies.

The beck currently supports a healthy population of the white clawed crayfish, our only native crayfish, but its survival is constantly threatened by crayfish plague, which has wiped it out in many parts of England and Wales. In much the same way that grey squirrels infect red squirrels with disease, so the signal crayfish, an introduced species from America, spreads the plague, although is itself immune.



blue damselfly



Smardale viaduct

Look out for a step-stile over to your left and cross to the other side of the wall. Turn right and follow a narrow trod through a series of old quarries. Cross another step-stile in the fence corner and continue toward the viaduct. A step-stile brings you out onto the old railway line, where you turn left and go over the viaduct.



Smardale Gill contains some of the most important limestone grassland in East Cumbria and a large area of ancient semi-natural woodland. Owned by the Cumbria Wildlife Trust, it was declared a National Nature Reserve in 1997. The reserve extends in both directions from here along six kilometres of the old railway.

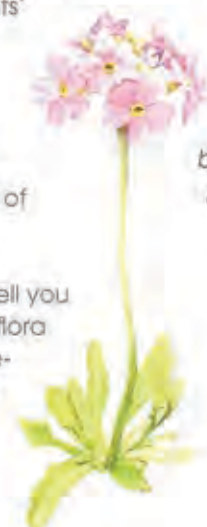
The grassland is dominated by blue moor grass and supports wild flowers such as alpine bistort, bird's eye primrose, fragrant and butterfly orchids, melancholy thistle and bloody cranesbill. In the wooded areas you may also find herb paris, an uncommon plant associated with ancient woodland.

Numerous different butterflies have been recorded, notably the Scotch argus found on only one other site in England. It lays its eggs on blue moor grass, which is the food plant for its caterpillars. Other species you might encounter include the northern brown argus, dark green fritillary, dingy skipper and common blue.

Carry on along the old railway past disused lime-kilns until you go under a stone bridge, where you turn immediately left up some steps.

As you walk along, you can see more clearly the area through which you walked on the other side of the valley. As well as the quarries from where stone was taken to build the viaduct, you will see rectangular mounds on the slopes above, known as pillow-mounds or 'giants' graves'. These are, in fact, the remains of artificial rabbit-warrens, constructed in the middle ages by the monks as a source of fresh meat in winter.

Interpretation panels tell you more about the local flora and the two huge lime-kilns that tower above the railway line.



melancholy thistle

bird's eye primrose

Cross over a step-stile, turn right and follow the fence line until this boundary becomes a stone wall. Now bear left directly downhill to Smardale Bridge.



view towards Smardale Bridge

On the hillside ahead, there are rows of cultivation terraces relating to an iron age village just north of here, where the clear outlines of circular huts are still visible. Smardale bridge was an important meeting place on a route that was once a busy cattle droving road between Kendal and Kirkby Stephen. There used to be an inn situated here, called the 'Scotch Ale House'.

At Smardale Bridge, turn right along the track and then left up the bank and through the wall-stile.

This wall is unusually thick and was probably once much higher, as it was constructed by Lord Wharton, in 1560, as a boundary to a deer-park.

Continue up the slope, heading toward the left hand end of the conifer plantation. Go through a gap in an earth bank and then keep the bank alongside on your right.

The earth bank is part of an old boundary you can see on both sides of the beck. It was built by the monks from Ravenstonedale and would have had a wooden fence along the top to protect the beck and its surrounding woodland from intruders. The beck would have been an important source of fish and the monks harvested the trees to make charcoal, hurdles, tool-handles and furniture.



Kings Head

Carry on with the conifer plantation on your right and a naturally regenerated woodland fenced off on your left. Go over a step-stile by a field gate and keep straight on across a big field, bearing slightly right to descend a steep track bearing left down to a wall stile. Cross the stile, over a ditch and up the next slope to a farm track. Follow the farm track for a short distance and bear left down to a pedestrian gate in a wall through which you emerge onto another farm track. Turn right, then left past the little building with the chimney. Go through the field gate, then left through another pedestrian gate and follow the path with the beck alongside on your left. Ignore the metal bridge and turn right through a field gate, then left through the underpass below the main road. Continue on a wide track between some cottages and out onto the road opposite the 'King's Head' pub. There is a footpath to the left of the pub which takes you through the churchyard and back to the school to conclude your walk.



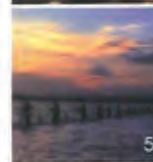
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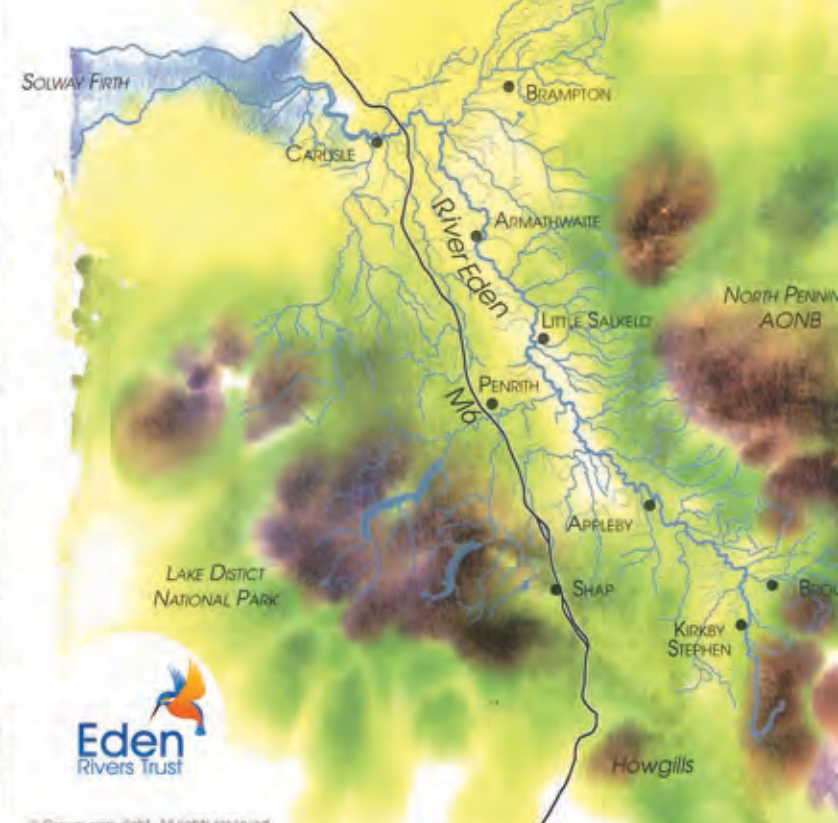
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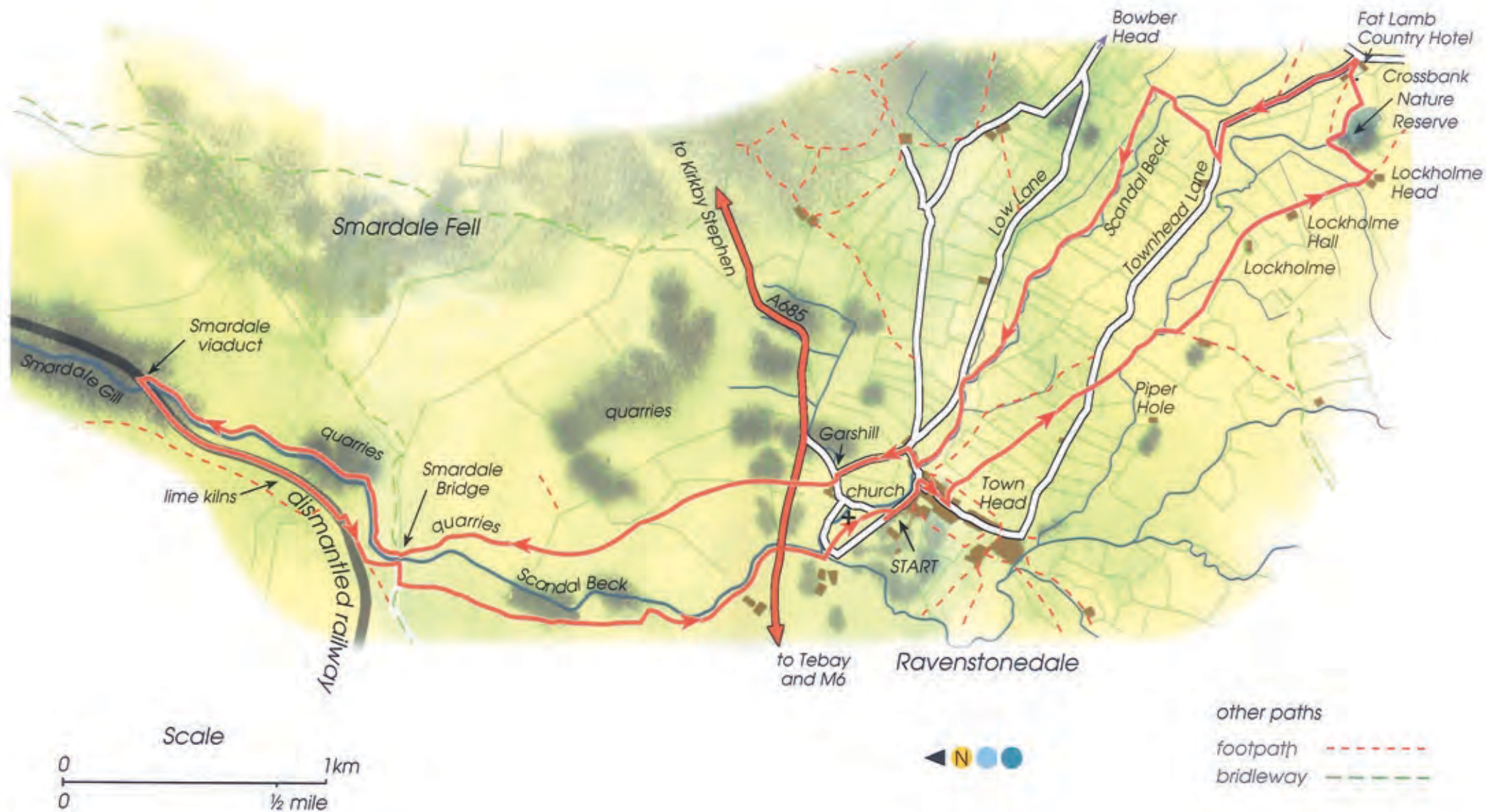
River Eden Catchment Area

Scottish Border



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7. Appleby horse fair 8. River Eden near Wetheral 9. Pendragon Castle

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